SEEKER AFTER TRUTH

A Handbook by
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From Tales, Discussions and Teachings, Letters and Lectures

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ANECDOTES AND NARRATIVES

Relevance

Q: One of the most impressive sights I have seen is a mass of people at the burial-place of a saint, with such emotion that I was gripped by it as by a physical force. Now, you say that the Sufis forbid such things. How can you deny the importance of an event like that?

A: Perhaps you have not heard the tale of Mulla Nasrudin, which can be treated as an analogy of your experience and your question?

In case you have not, here it is.

Nasrudin was driving a friend in his car at a spanking pace. Suddenly, glimpsing a signpost, the friend called out:

'Mulla, we're going in the wrong direction!'

'Why don't you ever think of something good? Look, for instance, at the speed we're going at!'

Emotion and Drink

I am being asked to illustrate that the learning process is distinct from its emotionally stimulative content.

There is a story of a teacher who spent much of his salary on alcoholic drink.

When this became known, students deserted him, saying 'We can hardly understand what he says.'

A friend, another scholar, suggested that, as he now had so few pupils, he should give up drinking.

The drunkard replied:

'I work in order to get money for drink. Now you want me to stop drinking so that I can work!'

This is an ancient parable about both teachers and students who 'drink': because they use the teaching/learning situation for individual and group stimulation. Like the teacher in the

example, learning may become secondary to their prime motivation, excitement.

Ghalib and Qalib

Not long ago I was listening to a radio interview between the North Country representative of a radio station and a Ukranian immigrant in Britain. The Ukranian, although he had left his country in 1944, had a strong foreign accent, but I could understand everything he said. But the English Northerner's pronunciation was so regional that one could only follow him with difficulty. And yet the Ukranian, who had lived in the North for many years, clearly understood every word.

Classical Persian provides the same sort of contrast, especially when there is any regional ingredient. In a recent discussion with an Iranian professor, I had the daunting experience of finding out not only that he pronounced the letter *q* as *gh*, as most modern Persians do, but that when a certain phrase of Rumi's was recited, he confused a word *qalib* (mould, form) for *ghalib* (overwhelmer). The result of this was that the phrase *Qalib az ma hast na ma az u* which means 'The form/model is from us, we are not from it' was imagined by him to mean 'The conqueror is from/of us, we are *not* from/of him.' The latter may mean something, but this mistranslation meant that the professor was unable to understand from his hearing of the phrase that it meant 'Mind is not from matter, matter is from mind'. It is this kind of thing which sometimes makes orientalists and others believe that some Sufi poets are not Sufis but social pundits.

The regional problem came into the picture again when I explained that *Qalib* here means 'form'. The professor was apparently unaccustomed to this usage, since – as he said – to him this word means 'mould'. Classical Persian perhaps used this form frequently. But Khurasani Persian (where classical Persian came into being) still understands *Qalib* as mould or form or model. Not only did Rumi come from this area (modern Afghanistan) but his usage would still be understood there. It is something like a frequent statement of the best English being spoken in Inverness, in *Scotland*. What might almost be called tribalism rather surged into my friend when he accused me of using an unfair advantage

in knowing various alternative meanings for Classical words, since my linguistic background is the still-living 'classical' speech of Afghanistan. When I said that I had not done it on purpose, he only said: 'I am not convinced.'

Virtually Unknown Principle of Human Organisation: Group Studies Paradox

Tradition avers, and experience verifies, one of the least-known and strangest facts about group studies.

Learning groups collect around an individual or a doctrine, or both. Because virtually all human actions are motivated by greed or fear ('whip or carrot'), these are the mainsprings of all study-groups. But these negative characteristics, although they alone caused the individuals to find, enter and persist in the group, are a distinct barrier to learning. The level of greed and fear, because these emotions disturb the learning and 'digesting' processes, must be reduced to tolerable proportions. It is always hard, and sometimes impossible, to do this without introducing new people who have lower than average levels of these two characteristics. Such people are almost always found in the general population, not mainly interested in the 'spiritual' purpose of the group which their presence can help. The only method of attracting them to the group in order for them to fulfil this function is if they are contacted and interested on an ordinary 'human,' not greed- or fear-based footing.

This is the paradox. This, too, is a real reason for people who are 'magnetised' into an esoteric or spiritual grouping to establish lines into the general population which are in areas and on subjects free from the bias of the group. The extent to which this can be done will determine the future of the group and the interaction of the committed 'groupists' and the members of the general population. Each provides something which the other lacks. Through their interaction a healthy community may form. Neither, on its own, will be able to develop into a more advanced organism.

If members of the group are unable to accept that their progress depends on those whom they often tend to regard as less than élite, they will become a narrow sociological group, with highly attenuated, even lost, potential. If the members of the population at large (the other category in the twofold process being discussed) look askance at the group-minded people, *their* own insularity will increase and their potential even for maintaining their situation will be impaired. The reason for this is that, as with, say, a chemical process, the influence exercised on each element by their having been brought into contact cannot be abolished by failure to sympathise or to continue in contact.

The refusal to accept that there may be merit, or even decisive value, in others outside their ranks can poison the prospects of those who reject this information. Failure to take sufficiently seriously the inherent value of a spiritual group (which has shed the very factors which brought it together in the first place in favour of the real, deeper unifying factor beyond) has a similar adverse effect on the 'outside' or uncommitted scoffer.

Most groups, since they are too strongly rooted in selfishness and hope and fear, and because they are almost never organised by specialists, fail to reach the stage where the transformation already referred to may take place and produce the group which can now be called a learning organism.

How to Learn What is Already Known

Someone says: 'If people need something in the way of knowledge, and if they somehow cannot take advantage of teaching, can they be helped by being given indirect teaching? Or could it even be that this might be the only way to teach such people?'

This is a question asked by someone who has read all my books.

The exact situation, and its answer, is given in *The Way of the Sufi**, in a quotation from al-Ghazzali.

Why, then was the question asked?

Someone else wants to know whether beliefs or experiences can have apparently different meanings according to one's psychological or spiritual stage, and whether this fact may not be the cause

**The Way of the Sufi*, Penguin edition: p.61;

of seeming contradictions in metaphysical teaching.

This precise question, even to the fact that it is in two parts and that they are in this order, is in the Counsels of Bahaudin, translated by me and reproduced in *Thinkers of the East** – only it is given in the form of an answer, an affirmation.

The questioner has read that book. Why, then, do we get the question?

A third questioner asks whether true mystical teachers may be 'invisible' to some people in the sense that such people cannot realise their worth. They may be mistaken for people engaged in some other enterprise. What they are teaching, and its methods, may be imagined to be some mundane activity, even.

This matter is explained, in almost the very same terms, in the instance of Charkhi and his Uncle, in my *Wisdom of the Idiots**. I have ascertained that our questioner has in fact read that book. How is it, then, that the statement becomes a question?

This does point to a certain common feature of much human behaviour. People hear, read, experience things (such as these pieces of information) and they do not digest them. Subsequently, like certain conditions of physical non-digestion, the material surfaces again. What these three people's minds are really saying by repeating this information in a sort of waking-dream fashion, is 'you have not paid attention to this information – look at it'. But it is really being said to the person himself or herself: not to me. Because, however, of a failure to go back to the literature to find answers to questions, to lay these ghosts of ideas, these people succumb to the compulsion of asking the question from others.

You see this behaviour in children: when they ask questions that they could have answered themselves, with a little thought. In the adult it is a symptom of someone who is not taking the trouble to try to do his own thinking. In the process, of course, he is in fact using the person whom he questions as a substitute for doing this work. Experience shows (which is why I make so much of this) that people who have not troubled themselves to absorb information from readily available sources and who instead continue asking questions from others in this way do not profit from the answers. The reason is that the effort of looking for the answer and registering it is part of the learning process. To apply for an answer, to get it too easily, almost always results in this individual again failing to digest the material.

If someone asks you a question, and you help him to find out for himself, or if a student you send him to a dictionary or research source, you do this because you know that this principle is correct,

* *Thinkers of the East*, Penguin edition: p.188 (Eighth Counsel);
Wisdom of the Idiots, Octagon edition: p.57–8, 'Charkhi and his Uncle'.

not because you weary of telling him. By contributing his own intelligent effort, he learns.

Poor Donkey

Q: I have heard of people who have spent time with Sufis and who have not made progress with them. Leaving the Sufis, they have associated with other spiritual teachers, where they have found happiness. What does this mean?

A: We have heard.... How often have I heard that!

Very well, then: have you heard of a tale by Rumi, describing such a situation as you mention:

There was once a poor ass, who lived with a humble man and worked for him. The ass was underfed, but it was alive. One day the chief of a King's stables took pity on the poor ass and had it brought into his care for a time, so that it might be fed and cared for along with the royal horses.

The poor donkey could not help contrasting its miserable state with the splendid condition of the noble Arab horses of the Sultan. It called upon God, asking why there was such a difference in their respective states.

Not long afterwards, however, came a war. The Arabs were taken away and returned terribly mutilated, with arrows sticking into them and covered with bandages. Some did not return at all.

This sight, of course, was the answer to the ass's question.

You cannot judge anything at all without having the context in which it has its being.

Nail or Screw?

People continually arrive saying that they have studied this and that, and it has not satisfied them. They have worked under so-and-so, but he proved unsuitable – or died – and they went to something else. They thought this and tried that, and (finally, of course, though I don't know how, with such a record, they can

expect anyone to believe it) they have arrived at my door.

It is their conviction that all these trials and tribulations, all these problems and false starts, make up a more or less coherent whole: they were all heading towards the same thing. Well, it may be so. In any case it is quite amazing (if they are not rationalising their inefficiency and inability to learn) that something should have so guided them that they won't allow that a single wrong decision was made. Some of them have been badly maimed by their experiences.

As for the others, nobody seems to have told them the old joke: 'There is one way to discover whether you need a nail or a screw in a plank. Drive the nail in. If it splits the wood – you needed a screw!'

Washerwomen

Two scholars were talking. One said: 'You know that Sufi who lives in the next town? My opinion is that he does not visit us because he fears that our superior minds will refute his vanities.'

The other said: 'That may well be so, but I cannot help feeling that he will in fact come here, because he will want to deceive us and gain more converts.'

They decided, through curiosity, to visit him, and so the following week they attended his evening meeting. The Sufi, however, had been forewarned about their conversation.

When the two scholars entered, the Sufi said to them: 'I am glad that you have come to see me, for you may be able to help me with a problem which has been exercising my mind.'

'And what, pray, is that?' they asked.

'Well' said the Sufi, 'I have been wondering about the widow woman who lives in the next street. She does not show herself, and it may be that she is afraid that the sight of her will make us realise that she is trying to attract attention. On the other hand, and this is my problem, I cannot be sure that her absence is calculated to increase our curiosity, and that she is even now planning to emerge: to make us discuss her.'

'What dreadful gossip is this?' spluttered the first scholar; while his companion was too shocked to make any comment at all.

'I cannot see why you take my preoccupations so ill' said the

Sufi, 'because they were specifically planned to accord with washerwomen's minds....'

Knowledgeability of the Audience

Dishonest or self-deluded preachers, propagandists and teachers depend for their success upon the comparative ignorance of their audiences.

Our main problem, however, is the relative 'knowledgeability' of the audience; because they know a few things, selectively taught them, they are compelled to judge us by these things.

So we have to teach basic facts, information, possible points of view, without being able to take them for granted, because these are so lacking.

Sometimes I feel like a garage man told by the owner of a vehicle: 'I want you to get that car started,' and am faced with the unpleasant task of telling him the fact: 'Your trouble is that you have got to learn how to drive.'

What They Are Like

A certain king was confused by the growing number and variety of dervishes in his domain. He called his Council of Ministers and sent them, in deep disguise, among the people of the Sufi philosophy, to study them and to report.

His instructions were: 'Find out what these people are like'.

Disguised as clerics, soldiers, friars, merchants, students and farmers, the members of the Council of Ministers (and a multitude of their agents) spent five years in their investigations.

Each reported separately, in writing, direct to the King.

When he opened the letters, he found that every single one contained the words: 'You ask what these people are like. I have to report that they are not like anyone or anything else in this world.'

Samples

People tend not only to assess unfamiliar things in terms of their own experience, but also in terms of parts of their experience which they imagine must be relevant to the case. They do this because they want to gain something, rather than because they want to know something.

This, indeed, is the main way in which we can assess these people: Do they want to take or do they want to know?

This is illustrated by the anecdote of the Sufi who was approached by a businessman, who wanted to be shown miracles.

'I am a commercial man,' he said. 'And, of course, if I am to accept something, I have to see a sample first. Why should you not show me one of your miracles?'

The Sufi said: 'It is not possible accurately to put what we are doing into commercial terms, but we can approximate to your ideas and still show you that you are greedy, not studious.

'Ours, in your phraseology, is a "non-commodity business". This means that you can have references attesting to the usefulness of our service – but samples, no!'

The Road to Khorasan

There was a time, in the Middle East, when the descendants of the Prophet were hunted down like wild animals, suspected of treason, captured and killed, for no other reason than their ancestry.

A story is told of a relative of ours during that time, who was a Sufi of high repute, and a man whose honour was everywhere respected. Unfortunately, of course, he was of such origins as to arouse the hatred and the active opposition of the authorities of the time.

He decided that it was not for him to go into hiding, and that it

would not be suitable for him to flee, as being contrary to the manners of dervishes. So he presented himself to the court of the Caliph.

The Caliph was at first surprised at such a meek surrender; but ultimately he issued a death-warrant, which he handed to the captain of the guard, saying, 'You Sayeds are a funny lot; but if you seek martyrdom, I am glad to grant it.'

The Sayed said: 'I have surrendered myself, thus relieving your men of much trouble in searching for me. Will you in exchange allow me to present myself personally to the executioner?'

The Caliph sent him off, accompanied by a couple of stalwart guards. The party made its way to the huge open caravanserai where the Public Executioner was sitting with his minions around an enormous bonfire.

The Sayed said to the guards: 'Now let me approach the Executioner myself, for it is not fitting that a man of my rank who has surrendered himself should be treated without dignity at such a moment as this.'

The guards agreed, and waited until they had seen the Sayed present himself to the Executioner. Then they withdrew.

The Executioner, recognising his captive, said: 'So, I have a customer tonight, by the order of the Caliph, have I?'

The Sayed threw his Order of Execution into the fire without showing it to the other man. Then he shouted: 'I have come of my own free will, as you see, unescorted. And I have been to the Caliph. And I have thrown the Order into the fire. I may have surrendered, but I refuse to be exiled to Khorasan!'

'You cannot refuse anything!' roared the Executioner. 'I shall not fail to execute my master's desire!'

And, instead of executing the Sayed, he handed him over to the Royal Stables to be given horses and an escort. By the fastest possible relays of animals and guards, he was conveyed from the land of the Arabs to the furthest borders of Khorasan, modern Afghanistan, where he was abandoned – in exile.

Service

At the court of the Khan of Paghman a nobleman asked a humble man (whom he envied because the Khan had honoured him):

'Is it traditional in your family to serve illustrious rulers, or are you the first of your line to enjoy this distinction?'

The man replied:

'My ancestors were men of honour; they did not have such lowly aspirations as to desire the companionship of monarchs.'

The nobleman persisted:

'Our Khans are Sharifs (descendants of the Prophet) and Sufis. Do your people not feel honoured, as we do, by the mere opportunity to serve the elect?'

The humble man said:

'Our family have hitherto not had such high aspirations. I am the first of my line to have the temerity to hope to serve such people.'

As Rich as You . . .

One of the nineteenth-century Nawabs of Sardhana was showing his horses to a visitor when the man said:

'I wish I was as rich as you!'

Although he was a foreigner, and therefore not aware of the code of the Sayeds, the Nawab, when he left, presented him with presents constituting his entire fortune. Years were to pass before the estate was able to recover from this single act of generosity.

Someone said to the Nawab:

'Did you have to adopt such a reckless course?'

He said:

'To be false to my traditions would have been impossible. Someone asked today why we bother ourselves to try to impart Sufi learning to the unworthy. It is because they ask us. Do you not know the story of our illustrious ancestor, Ali, the son-in-law of the Prophet?

'In battle, Ali shattered the sword of an enemy warrior, who stood helpless, waiting to be cut down, but at the same time shouting in his fury: "Give me a sword and I will destroy you!"

'Ali handed him his own sword, leaving himself without any means of defence. His enemy, when he had recovered from his surprise, asked:

"How can you hand your only sword, in the middle of a battle, to

the man who hates you and is trying to destroy you?"

'Ali said:

"It is the family tradition that nobody asks one of us for something in vain."

'We only know this story today because that same man refused to kill a man like Ali.'

A Word can be One of Three Things . . .

One of my choicest memories is when I translated into Persian a couplet from Hafiz. It had been quoted in English by a distinguished English judge whom an associate and I were consulting about something. The judge said: 'These lines have always impressed me by their clarity: put them into Persian again for your friend.'

The Afghan Sufi who had just arrived in England was quite amazed.

'Do you say that this man is a judge?' he asked me.

I said that he was, and that he had also taught law.

'Ask him if there is any more in these lines than the sentiments which he admires' said the fascinated Sufi.

No, there was no more, said the legist.

The Sufi now quoted a tale from Rumi:

'A word,' said a grammarian to a dervish, 'can be only one of three things.' The dervish at once started to howl and rend his garments. When he had calmed himself a little, he exclaimed:

'And to think that I had always hoped that there might be another thing than those!'

His Honour, as soon as the story was finished, seemed slightly restless. 'What did you say His Excellency was?'

'Master of the Royal Afghan Mint, in Kabul,' I told him.

'Oh, I see.... One of these complicated customers, what?'

Croaker

Q: If, as you say, rituals are fossilized exercises, and that literature or practices outlive their usefulness, how do you explain why they are so tenaciously held by so many people? They must fulfil a function which is valuable, surely....

A: If people want something, it does not mean that the thing is good for them, or even that it is fulfilling a function which is in fact useful or irreplaceable.

There is a story about this, which has been found to be a very good remedy against trying to get something useful out of something useless, even harmful.

There was once a townee who went to a food stall to buy a flap of bread with watercress in it, which was being sold by a countryman. As he put the bread to his mouth, a frog leapt out and squatted on the ground. The townsman, who had never seen a frog before, bent down and picked it up. The frog croaked, '*Ghar-ghar!*'

'*Ghar* or no *ghar*' said the townsman, 'you are going back into this bread. I paid good money for you, after all!'

Wealth of Satisfactions

Q: What is wrong with following one – or even several – of the spiritual paths which are so richly available and which offer such a wealth of satisfactions, as we know by experience of them?

A: Wealth and riches, the terms you use, constitute a good introduction to the parable which answers this question:

There was once a miser who put all his money, as it came in from his shop, into a cavity between the wall of his house and that of his neighbour, coin by coin, through a small hole which he had made for the purpose.

This practice even increased his greed, and he craved even richer satisfactions until he not only spent nothing at all but contrived to visit his neighbour at every meal-time, so that he could eat free of all cost to himself. 'I am, after all,' he told himself, 'repaying him by means of my company: and, anyway, he likes to be charitable and to feed whomever is in his house when meals are served.'

He even sold his business, and put all the proceeds into the wall, deriving great pleasure from his generous friend's never-ending hospitality.

When, after many years, the man next door died, the miser broke into his hoard, to find that the neighbour had robbed it: he had been eating his own money....

So ask yourself whether the 'wealth of satisfactions' which you can obtain from a spiritual path (or from another source of stimulus) is in any way of the nature of the miser's....

The More the Better

Q: Sufi teachers often say that you should not do spiritual exercises on your own. They also say that teachers who make everyone do the same exercise are ignorant, and can even cause harm. Why is this, since doing such exercises is a part of all devotional systems?

A. In the first place, it is not a part of all devotional systems. It is a part of all systems at the stage when they have deteriorated from correct application of exercises to automatism. Even the 'teachers' do not know this. As to the reason, Sufis don't allow it because it does cause harm, obsession and imagination instead of enlightenment. But you cannot know this until you have experienced the alternative. You will have to rely upon correct information and listen to a tale about it:

There was once a mosquito who decided to kill a proud horse. She said to the horse: 'If anyone could kill you, the most powerful beast anywhere, would such an individual be even greater than you?'

The horse answered: 'Certainly. But, of course, there is no way of killing *me*!'

Then the mosquito stung him. But this was nothing but a pinprick to the horse. The mosquito was ambitious, but could not think what next to do. 'I'll go to the hare' she said to herself, 'because he is wise and people say that he knows how to help one attain his desire.'

The hare, when questioned, said: 'Band all your mosquitos together, act in unison, sting again and again, and you are bound to succeed.'

So the insect called all her friends, and they listened to the wise

words of the hare, and were inspired to attain this desire of overcoming the horse. They set out in an enormous swarm, found the horse, and stung him to death.

Naturally, the mosquitos were delighted at their success. They went back to the hare and told him, and all the other animals surrounding the hare at his daily court were equally impressed, and many enrolled themselves as his disciples. Nobody, of course, thought to ask what had been achieved in reality.

Now each of the mosquitos imagined himself to be a champion. They dispersed in all directions and stung everything in sight. From that day to this they have never managed to kill anything by means of their stings alone. Now and again a cloud of mosquitos kills some animal, and this keeps the legend alive, in some circles, that there is something to be gained by stinging, and that the mosquito is the greatest thing in creation – after the hare, which advised it in the first place.

Who is at Fault?

Q: I have been studying under (a certain person) and I am disenchanted with him. His obsessions and those of his followers cause me pain. What should I do?

A: What you should do depends upon what you are like. There may be nothing which you can do. There is a story of a thief who robbed a man of a number of coins. When he tried to buy something with them, they were found to be counterfeit. As he was being led to the scaffold after conviction for trying to pass false coin, he saw the man whom he had robbed, and called out that he was the cause of his ruin.

This has given rise to the proverb: 'Do not steal, if you do nbt want to be hanged.'

You cannot just choose one event in a succession of happenings and claim redress on that basis.

Pleasant and Unpleasant

Q: 'Why do Sufis often make people uncomfortable, or even hostile, by what they say and do?'

A: If you are a surgeon lancing a boil, and it hurts, does the patient say, 'Why am I being made uncomfortable?' or 'What is being done is a means to an end"?

Q: But if Sufis are releasing the 'pus of the mind', why do they so often give pleasure?

A: If a doctor puts you on a delicious diet, do you then say, 'Why have I been prescribed such delicious apricots?' You know that it is because they contain a nutrition or remedy which you need. The pleasant or unpleasant taste, the experience, is incidental.